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Local News

COVID-19: Alberta's vaccine passport program lifted as of midnight Tuesday

Lisa Johnson

Feb 09, 2022 • February 9, 2022 • 5 minute read •  240 Comments



Premier Jason Kenney provides an update on Alberta's COVID-19 response in Calgary on Jan. 4, 2022. PHOTO BY AZIN GHAFARI /Postmedia

Albertans are waking up Wednesday to what could be the beginning of the end of COVID restrictions in this province, despite warnings that the government may be moving too quickly.

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Alberta Premier Jason Kenney announced on Tuesday the province's COVID-19 vaccine passport program will end immediately.

At an evening news conference, Kenney said the restriction exemption program has served its purpose, but is no longer needed since Alberta passed peak of Omicron infections about three weeks ago.

“The threat of COVID-19 to public health no longer outweighs the hugely damaging impact of health restrictions on our society,” said Kenney, adding his government would only move forward if it does not threaten the capacity of the health-care system.

Capacity limits were also nixed Tuesday at 11:59 p.m. for venues with capacity limits under 500, including libraries and places of worship.

Effective Sunday at 11:59 p.m., the province will no longer require masking for children and youth in schools, and for Albertans aged 12 and under in any setting.

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The target date for the second phase of the government’s plan is March 1, when the province plans to remove remaining restrictions, including the indoor mask mandate, work-from-home requirements, remaining capacity limits, limits on social gatherings, and screening for youth activities. The timing of the third phase is still up in the air, but the government said it will eventually include removing COVID-19 measures in continuing care.

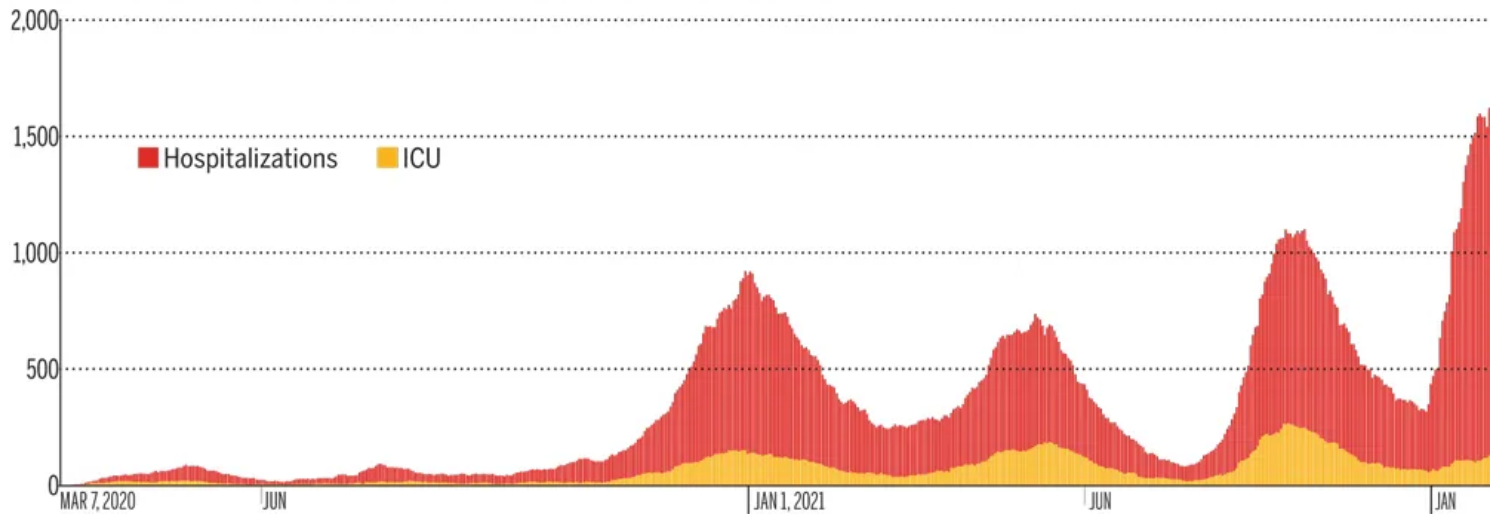
“I very much hope that today’s long-awaited announcement gives a sense of optimism,” said Kenney, acknowledging that many Albertans will say the government’s plan moves too fast. Kenney has repeatedly said the plan will be based on declining hospital pressure, but on Tuesday, that pressure was up.

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HOSPITALIZATIONS DUE TO COVID-19



SOURCE: ALBERTA HEALTH

LORI WAUGHTAL / POSTMEDIA NEWS

Chief medical officer of health Dr. Deena Hinshaw noted 1,623 Albertans were in hospital due to COVID-19, including 129 in intensive care units, which is an increase of 11 in the ICU and 81 patients overall since the previous day's update.

Kenney did not directly address the day-to-day rise in hospitalizations, but pointed to a decline in active cases and rolling seven-day averages of new cases decreasing from about 7,000 a day to approximately 2,000 per day.

"We are well positioned to live with this virus, as we do with many other infectious diseases," said Kenney.

In response to reporters' questions, the premier also denied that the move had anything to do with protests from those demanding the repeal of vaccine mandates of all types across the country, including a blockade the government has condemned as illegal at the Coutts border crossing, now stretching into its 11th day, pointing to other jurisdictions' decisions to lift COVID-19 measures.

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“None of that has to do anything with a few trucks parked at the Coutts border crossing,” said Kenney, who added keeping the previous rules in place would invite widespread noncompliance for no purpose.

“I think it would be a bit of a mug’s game to say, ‘Keep this going for a few days,’ when we know that in many areas we’re already having compliance problems,” said Kenney.

Health Minister Jason Copping said the government is taking a “conditions-based approach,” in which the province focuses on the number of new patients admitted to hospitals due to COVID-19 “over a sustained period of time.”

“There will be uncertainty. COVID-19 will be with us for a very long time, and we will see times when COVID-19 infections will be higher than normal,” said Copping.

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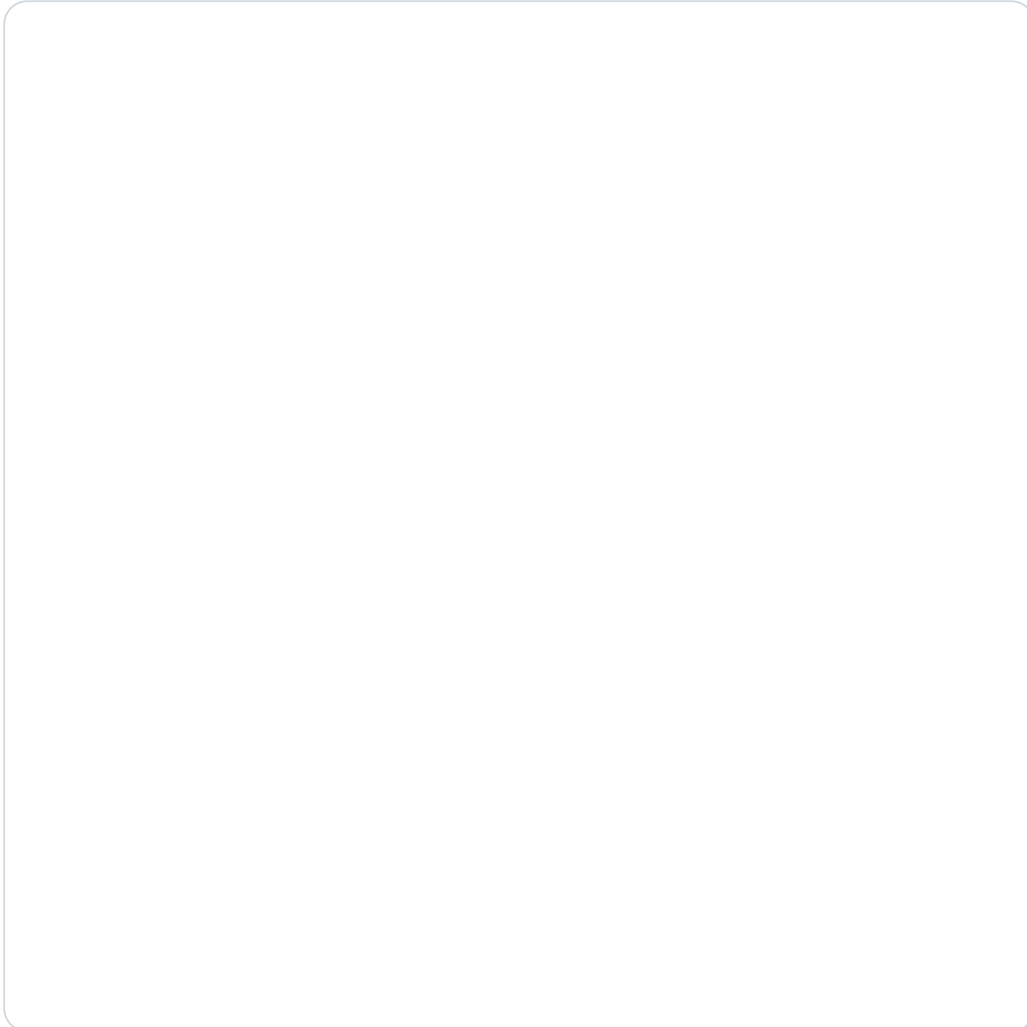
While the government news conference was still underway, Education Minister Adriana LaGrange shared a letter on Twitter to school boards clarifying that while masking will still be required for teachers and school staff, no school board in Alberta will be “empowered” to impose mask mandates on K-12 students.

Adriana LaGrange 

@AdrianaLaGrange · [Follow](#)



Please see my letter to school authorities below:



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In a response on Twitter to the announcement, Edmonton Public School Board chair Trisha Estabrooks said it came as a surprise, comes “too much, too fast,” and if it had been consulted on the shift Edmonton Public would have “shared the desire to move slowly, listen to parents, to listen to boards.”

Trisha Estabrooks (she/her)
@TrishEstabrooks · [Follow](#)



Tonight's announcement comes as a surprise to **#EPSB**. School divisions were not consulted on this shift. If we were, **#EPSB** would have shared the desire to move slowly, to listen to parents, to listen to boards.

8:18 PM · Feb 8, 2022 

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As of Tuesday's COVID-19 update, the province had identified 1,667 new cases, with a test positivity rate of 36 per cent — up from 33 per cent on Sunday.

Thirteen total new deaths have been reported, bringing the COVID-19 death toll in Alberta to 3,686.

Kenney's plan comes after Saskatchewan Premier Scott Moe announced earlier Tuesday it would end its vaccine passport program beginning Monday. Remaining public health orders in that province requiring masking in indoor public spaces will remain in effect until the end of February.

Guy Smith, president of the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees (AUPE), which represents more than 55,000 health-care workers in the province, said in a release Tuesday night the plan risk creating the same problems Alberta has seen repeatedly over the pandemic — a brief period of reopening, followed by another wave.

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“Workers on the front lines of public services are exhausted and the prospect of facing yet another COVID-19 wave is almost unbearable,” Smith said.

“We need to have a real long-term strategy to deal with COVID-19. This government has absolutely failed to produce one.”

Opposition reacts to lifting of restrictions

NDP health critic David Shepherd accused the premier of accelerating his timeline to remove public health restrictions due to the demands of protesters at the Coutts border blockade.

He said throughout the pandemic Kenney has continued to act last.

“But where he will act first is when it comes to trying to save his political career. His leadership vote is pending and as a result, he and the entire UCP are allowing an illegal blockade to dictate public health. This is deeply concerning. No, it's worse than that, it's cowardly, it's wrong.”

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Shepherd acknowledged the province is seeing some slight shifts in its current healthcare situation but said it is too soon to lift these restrictions.

“Indeed, we could be in a position soon where we can make careful, prudent steps to start to ease restrictions while still protection our health care system,” he said. “But we are hearing from many who are on the frontlines that this is not that time yet.”

The Alberta Hospitality Association (AHA) issued a response to the government’s announcement Tuesday night and said while it’s a step in the right direction, it still leaves many in the hospitality industry feeling unclear and frustrated.

AHA said the hospitality industry wants an understanding as to why the REP would be lifted prior to other restrictions such as table capacity and curfew.

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“Removal of REP without loosening additional restrictions will continue to see operators enduring huge losses daily,” reads AHA’s response.

The association is asking the Alberta government for three things before it moves into Phase 2 of its reopening plan.

AHA is asking for a clear understanding of what metrics and benchmarks are required for the government to move into the second stage of reopening, more information on which additional restrictions, specific to the industry, will be lifted on March 1 and for a clear plan of provincial support for the businesses within the industry.

— *With files from Kellen Taniguchi*

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